

Education Officials For NCLB Flexibility

March 24, 2004

The Honorable Roderick R. Paige
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Secretary:

As chief state school officers who have been implementing No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the field these last two years, we are writing about what we have determined to be a problem central to the execution of the Act, and to suggest a solution that upholds the purpose and the promise of NCLB.

All of us wholeheartedly agree with the goal of raising standards and expectations for academic achievement of all students. We concur that schools should be held accountable for results as they embrace this primary mission.

A troubling issue, however, is that without any changes to the law, calculations suggest that within a few years, the vast majority of all schools will be identified as in need of improvement. Many of these schools will be given that designation despite having shown steady and significant improvement for all groups of students.

While flexibility is the watchword of NCLB, states currently do not have the flexibility to use alternative models to determine which schools are making adequate yearly progress – and which schools are not on the right track and should be held accountable. Many states already had in place well-established accountability systems based on high standards and expectations. We find NCLB's requirement that all schools show adequate yearly progress by reaching a single bar – the status bar model – has had the unintended effect of penalizing those thriving systems.

A growth model, on the other hand, considers the net improvement of individual districts and schools and actually is more congruent with high academic standards and rigorous definitions of student proficiency than a status model. There is no need to drop the key elements of the accountability provisions of NCLB in order to accommodate a growth model. However, the U.S. Department of Education should make it clear that the status model in Title I accountability provisions is just that – a model. We encourage you to offer genuine flexibility by supporting legislation to redefine the relationship between federal and state governments in the implementation of these provisions.

Our state education agencies are working diligently to implement the law, providing schools extra resources to the extent of our abilities and focusing sharply on improved academic performance. The reality, however, is that states across this nation face budget

limitations and, in some cases, severe shortfalls. This makes it imperative that we focus our resources on schools with the greatest need for improving academic achievement.

This does not mean that the federal government should function as a source of funding without any corresponding responsibility on the part of the states to meet national goals. We propose a set of broad guidelines that would at once address the need for statewide accountability and still accord states true flexibility in how they meet federal requirements. In this new relationship, states would ensure they would:

- adopt the national goal of every student proficient or above in reading/language arts and mathematics by 2013-14;
- develop and adopt statewide academic standards in accord with state law;
- administer annual academic achievement assessments in reading/language arts and mathematics;
- report state-level results annually in a prescribed format corresponding to the national goals;
- ensure that parents are informed of test results;
- design statewide accountability systems that effectively measure academic achievement, seek to reduce the achievement gaps between student subgroups, and increase graduation rates.

As long as states accept these conditions, they should be allowed to adopt alternative accountability systems, whether based on a growth model or on a status model. States should continue to enjoy such flexibility unless they cannot demonstrate:

- significant improvement in the percent proficient or above in mathematics and reading/language arts;
- significant movement toward closing the achievement gap between high and low achieving students.

What constitutes “significant improvement” or “significant movement” in a particular state should be informed by the best research in educational measurement, not federal mandate. We are proposing that the federal government hold the state responsible for educational outcomes, not processes.

As more and more schools enter Program Improvement, it is imperative that we move as quickly as possible to target our limited resources in the most effective manner possible by focusing squarely on the schools that need it most. Therefore, we respectfully ask that you join us in seeking immediate legislative relief so that our states may better serve students with a public school accountability system that is more flexible and fair than the law currently allows.

Enclosed for your review is a white paper that lays out in more detail the above proposal to facilitate increased student outcomes. We look forward to hearing from you and opening a renewed dialogue on improving education for all America’s schoolchildren.

Respectfully,

Chief State School Officers:



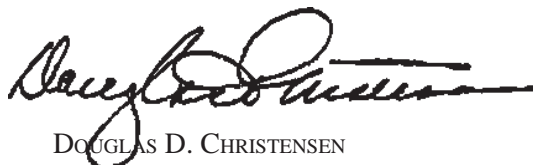
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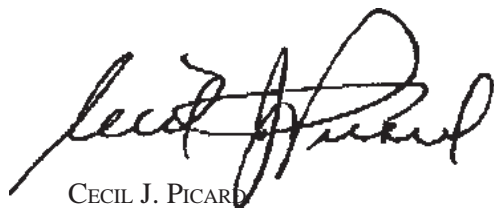
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